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Karamanli – a new language variety in the Genizah: T-S AS 215.255

By [Julia G. Krivoruchko](#)

The list of language varieties found in the Genizah is impressive: from Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Judaeo-Arabic and Arabic, to Judaeo-Greek and Greek, Judaeo-Persian, Yiddish, Judaeo-Occitan, Georgian, and possibly even some Judaeo-Malayalam. Yet the Cairo treasure trove seems to hold endless surprises for its patient researchers, as the number of the language varieties keeps increasing.

During the routine description work on the folder T-S AS 215, Dr Amir Ashur spotted an unusual script on a tiny fragment of paper with only nine legible lines. Its verso contained even fewer. From a first glance at the fragment it was immediately clear to me that it is Greek – but only in its script, not the language, and that it is the first and until now only example of Karamanli in the Cambridge Genizah. Prof. [Evangelia Balta](#), a senior researcher in the [Institute for Neohellenic Research](#) of the National Research Foundation in Athens and a major specialist in Karamanlidic Studies, has kindly examined the digital image and confirmed my suggestion. In her opinion, T-S AS 215.255 is a fragment of an eighteenth-century document.

What is Karamanli or Karamanlidic, as it is sometimes called? In its wider meaning, the term refers to the language variety used by Turkish-speaking Greeks that was written down in the Greek alphabet. The designation was not used by the speakers themselves, who referred to their language as Turkish.

During the late Byzantine period, Turkish tribes started spreading into Asia Minor, which had been at that time mostly Greek-speaking. With the fall of the Byzantine Empire, and the increase in the quantity of Turkish-speakers, some groups of Greek-speakers succumbed to the linguistic pressure and switched to Turkish. However, they did not abandon their religion (Orthodox Christianity) and continued to use Greek for the liturgy. The Greek script was traditionally taught in such communities, since it was necessary for the maintenance of religious identity. With time, the script started to be used for writing Turkish, the new mother-language of the Greek population. Such linguistically assimilated Greeks were called Karamanlides after a Turkish tribe residing in Anatolia.

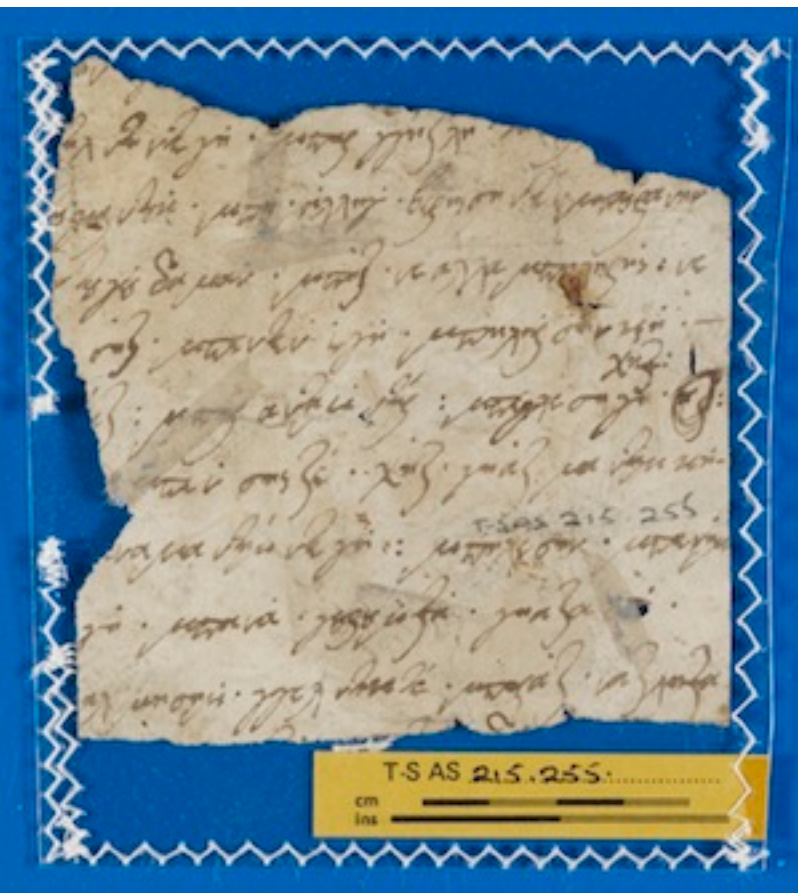
Among the first known Karamanlidic compositions there was a version of the *Confession* of Gennadios Scholarios, produced after the conquest of Constantinople and printed in 1710. Being economically and culturally proactive, Karamanlides boasted a flourishing press that produced newspapers, journals, yearbooks and almanacs for every taste. Ca. 750 books in Karamanlidic are known to have been published. A large proportion of them dealt with matters of religion, e.g. *Gülzarı imanı mesihi* (Ἀπόκρυφον της Χριστιανικής Πίστεως), printed in 1718. Particularly intensive was the process of translating literature from European languages, which stimulated local literary output. Thus, the first novel in Turkish (in fact, an adaptation of a Greek prototype) was *Temaşa-i Dünya ve Cefakâr ve Cefakeşler* ('The Theatre of the World, and Tyrants and Tyrannised'), written as a Karamanli text by Evangelinos Misailidis (1820–1890), and published in four volumes in Istanbul in 1871–1872.

The Karamanli community began to change linguistically when the Ottoman Empire was shaken by the storms of nationalism. With the emergence of the Greek state, the attempts to re-Hellenize the Greeks of Asia Minor intensified, which led to the wide introduction of Grecisms into the texts, and sometimes to quasi-bilingual production, featuring the 'correct', i.e. Greek vocabulary. Ancient Greek literature was also translated.

The Treaty of Lausanne (1923) brought to the end the tradition of Karamanlidic writing: through an exchange of populations, the Greek Christians were brought to Greece where they switched to speaking and writing Greek.

How could a Karamanli document find its way into the Genizah? The trade connections between Egypt and Asia Minor were strong, and Jews, as well as Greeks, participated in it. Thus, the text is likely to have been produced by a Greek merchant, or even by a non-Greek (Turk? Armenian?) who learnt Karamanli in order to get acquainted with European innovations (such cases are known).

Once again the Genizah turns up something quite unexpected. It is hoped that historians of the Ottoman period will take a close look at what the Cairo Genizah has to offer.



T-S AS 215.255 recto, Karamanli: Turkish in Greek script

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